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ABSTRACT

Rhetoric is the most important of the writer's tools, and structure in writing is not being taught in the classroom. Structures of writing are the archetypal patterns of perception and grow out of the very structure of the human mind. Structure is imposed on the writer who wants to communicate by the reader's capacity to perceive. The analytical part of the mind uses structure as a tool for understanding in both reading and thinking. Structure is a critical tool and a creative tool as well as a learning tool. Knowledge of structure sharpens our discrimination. Some educators object to stressing structure because they feel that it stifles creativity, but knowledge of pattern actually offers a procedure for a further dimension in creativity; it liberates the inarticulate and whets the articulate to new achievements. The goal is to know structure so completely that it becomes a part of the habits and patterns of thought and becomes totally disguised in them. (LL)

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USING STRUCTURE TO GENERATE WRITING

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Structure in writing is only a tool. Anyone who teaches rhetoric for the sake of the rhetoric, as an end in itself, is a fool. But, whoever tries to teach writing without teaching rhetoric or structure is trying to drive a nail without a hammer -- and in the dark. A carpenter does not build a house without the tools of his trade. We cannot expect students to write without the tools of the writer's craft.

I hope I don't offend you when I assert that structure is the most important of the writer's tools, or when I advocate that teachers deliberately and conscientiously use structure to generate, stimulate, propagate student writing. My experience is that teachers who go to conventions or read professional journals need such harangues as

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mine least. But my experience also suggests that teachers in general are ignorant of rhetoric, structure, form in writing, whatever we decide to call it. My experience with the students that come to college corroborates that teachers in general are not teaching structure. Hardly one in ten of my students this fall could define a topic sentence or identify one in context. Only one in fifty had ever heard of so simple a structure as the five-paragraph essay. Many speakers at conventions, many articles in professional journals, and a basic trend in recent textbooks endorse my belief that structure is the thing most missing in student writings, the thing most needed in classrooms. You, who participate in conventions and read the professional literature, are the leaders in the profession. You are the ones who must re-establish structure in the classroom, if it is to be there, and I think it must. My purpose here is to help you frame arguments that will hopefully improve our schools' curricula and instruction.

Specifically, I would like to suggest some answers to such questions as: What do we mean by structure? How does it work? Why is it necessary? And maybe I can offer some possible answers to objections you are likely to hear.

What Do We Mean By Structure?

The structures of writing are the archetypal patterns of perception. It's that simple -- and that complicated. The human mind has the rather awesome power to abstract and conceptualize patterns from the details it perceives. Indeed, it not only has the power to generalize from experience, it insists upon doing so all the time. It takes a sampling of words and before it will accept them as coherent, it organizes them into the patterns we call phrases, sentences, paragraphs, essays, stories, poems, books. Our minds impose such structural pattern upon detail so that we can understand. In reading and writing, these are the basic structures of rhetoric, the normative patterns or formulas without specific fulfillments, similar to Plato's Ideal

Forms, by which we recognize and understand thought. They are conceptualizations of perceived experience.

Rhetorical structures are not arbitrary. They grow out of the very structure of the human mind. Expository paragraphs alternate between specific detail and embracing topic because the human mind needs -- demands -- both the specific and the general in order to understand. Man may think in universals, as medieval theologians asserted, but he perceives in particulars. Give the mind a generalization a one -- "boys are a problem" -- and it will react with

ueness, because the perceptual element is absent -- it coul mean any number of specific things: that boys don't obey parental commands, or that they obey them slavishly, or that they cost a lot to raise, or that they won't study in school. If "boys are a problem" means something to you, it's because the phrase splashed a specific picture across the back of your forehead. The mind cannot <u>see</u> a generalization. On the other hand, give the mind an unattached,

specific detail -- "a boy with mud on his pants" -- and it will react with confusion, because there are so many general topics it could belong to -- he could have been splashed by a passing car; he could have fallen accidentally; he could have gotten muddy unconsciously while playing marbles; he may have muddied himself deliberately for a costume party. The detail could mean that he's a problem, or that he has a warm heart, or that he's careless, or that he's creative. The mind simply cannot comprehend a detail in isolation. A generalization is made understandable when it is given a seeable image; a detail is made understandable when it is given a context. Paragraphs consist of general topic and specific supporting detail because the mind must have both to understand -- and must have both within a single attention span. The capacity of the human mind, in other words, dictates the structure of the paragraph.

The reader's capacity to perceive imposes structure on the writer who wants to communicate. If readers can perceive and understand only in certain ways, then those ways become

the "currency of the realm." The writer, if he wants to do business, must use that currency. Contemplate, for example, the perceptual and conceptual jobs an expository introduction must perform. Readers may have been doing any number of things before the writer intrudes. They may have been contemplating their toenails or fantasizing themselves into an adventure. The first job of an introduction, therefore, is to get the reader's mind off what it was on and onto the writer's subject. There may be a million different ways of doing this, but some kind of leading gesture is inevitably necessary. Once the reader's mind is on the writer's subject, it must be focused upon the angle, point of view, interpretation that the writer wants to center his discussion on. This can be done with a question or an assertion, with a gimmick or a diagram, but some statement or implication of thesis is necessary, for the existence of a thesis is the only thing that will transform random words into a purposeful communication,

just as a topic is the only thing that will make a group of details in a paragraph cohere. Once the thesis is in mind, the reader still needs one important thing -- an indication of how the writer is going to discuss his thesis. Some theses state or successfully imply that a comparison/contrast is the method of discussion to follow. Some prepare readers for histories, some suggest lists of points or analyses. Some such procedure is necessary before the reader can proceed without confusion. A lead-in, a thesis, and a method of operation are the normative parts of an expository introduction. And they are prior to discussion. The jobs they perform must be done, somehow, before the reader's mind can make sense of any discussion. They are the archetypal funnel into explanation. Every successful expository introduction performs these jobs in some one of the million ways in which introductions are written.

Consider also the structural patterns which the basic relationships between a writer and a reader impose. If the

writer begins by assuming that his reader does not already know what he has to say, he incurs the primary responsibility of explaining clearly and precisely. Without clarity and precision, he and explanation fail utterly. Such archetypal patterns as the expository introduction and the topic and support paragraph exist because they are ways of achieving clarity and precision. Patterns of organization, such as comparison/contrast, chronology, analysis into parts, exist because they are ways ideas can be explained clearly and precisely to an uninformed audience. However, to take a second case, if ~~the writer assumes that~~ the reader already has considerable information about his thesis but the writer believes that information is wrong, the writer will not set out to explain, but to persuade. He is forced into a different strategy and set of structures when he assumes that his reader is not uninformed, but misinformed. Logical demonstration and emotional force are the maneuvers which convince recalcitrant audiences. The rhetorical structures of logical

and emotional force are different from those of explaining clearly and precisely. Or, to take a third case, if the writer assumes that his reader is informed, perhaps even sophisticated on the subject, but he still wants to share with him some insight, he will have to assume a third set of strategies and structures. Writing intended to communicate between equals does not have the tone nor structure of either exposition or persuasion, but the tone of informal, sophisticated conversation. In style and structure, the informal essay aims to please by sharing and stimulating thought. Its structure emphasizes the juxtapositions that the 18th century man called wit.

It is important in teaching, as in writing, not to confuse one of these three basic kinds of essays with the other. Don't offer your students samples of informal style when you mean for them to write formally. To confuse the normative patterns of different kinds of writing is to confuse the student's learning process.

Normative archetypal patterns exist in creative writing as well. Take, for example, fiction and its five stages of plot. In my classes, I often call these the "five 'C's' of plot" -- conflict, complication, climax, consequences, and close. The percepts and concepts of change that emerge in a movement from conflict to resolution are the normative pattern by which we recognize a story. It is the structure by which our minds distinguish a story from a sketch, an essay, a poem. Five million specific scenarios may fulfill this general pattern of a story, and some of them will fulfill sub-patterns such as the flashback story, the kaleidoscope story, and so on. But the way in which we both perceive stories of others and conceive stories of our own involves this normative archetype of change. There are dozens of such archetypal patterns in the reading and writing of fiction -- some associated with character, some with point of view, some with structure, setting, and so on. Poetry, too, has

dozens of patterns. The use of metaphor as a compressing comparison that juxtaposes the known and seeable against the unknown and hidden, that uses physical imagery as a catapult to metaphysical meaning, is only one of these patterns.

How Does Structure Work?

Normative archetypal structure is basic to the paradigm of how we learn language. Most linguists now agree that we learn to speak by perceiving the patterns in which a language occurs and then generating expression of our own thoughts in accordance with those patterns. We have the same reasons to believe this general paradigm works for the written dialect of the language as we have to believe it works in the oral. It is only reasonable that a student cannot write an expository essay until he has some sense of what an expository essay is, until he has a grasp of the structure of percept and concept that distinguish and identify exposition.

A knowledge of structural patterns serves both the analytic and synthetic syndromes of the human mind. C. G. Jung in Psychological Types posited several continua of the human psyche. The extrovert-to-introvert continuum is the most famous of these, of course. An important one for the description of human thought is the analytical-to-synthetic syndrome. The analytical faculty of the mind habitually perceives experience by dividing it into its parts. The synthetic facultyof the mind perceives experience in organic wholes. All of us have these two faculties, some in different proportions from others, and all of us are like a node on that continuum and move, for one problem or thought, in one direction, for a different problem or thought, in the other. Concepts of structure serve both these faculties. The analytical part of the mind uses structure as a tool for understanding in both reading and thinking. In reading, analytical structure makes perception possible by unraveling the strands of

another writer's thought. In thinking, structure makes problem-solving possible by analysis of conceptions or wholistic problems into perceptions or steps toward solution. The synthetic part of the mind uses structure as a tool for testing wholeness. When we have started a particular procedure, such as the comparison of parts, knowledge of structure tests our progress and fulfillment. It tells us what we have accomplished and what we have left to do. It shows us holes and gaps in thought, and thus forces us to invent or synthesize something to fill the gap. It forces us, in other words, to synthesize our product as an organic unit.

Structure is also a critical tool. Knowledge of structure sharpens our discrimination. It educates and finally provides the basis upon w hich judgments can be made. Degrees of success or failure can only be assessed in relation to some norm. In writing, structure provides that norm.

Structure is also a creative tool. At its simplest, creativity re-combines old patterns. Originality has been described in specifically these terms -- new dress for old thought. But knowledge of pattern also offers a procedure for a further dimension in creativity. In his Paris Review interview, E. M. Forster speaks of the necessity of the writer beginning with a mountain in mind through which he intends to make his story move. It is only when we have this concept of where we are going that we can foreshadow what we hope to achieve. That mountain in the dim distance supplies us with the very vocabulary of foreshadowing, suspense, thematic overtone. In other words, a sense of structure is a Gestalt field that both governs and creates detail. For the writer, this is imagination. Field and closure are scenarios of the inner eye that keep the writer firmly on the way to his mountain. They generate detail.

Structure, normative archetypal patterns of writing,

are inevitably involved in learning to write. Therefore, we as teachers are best used when we help students to discover structure, guide them in practice, and evaluate honestly and accurately their writing. In other words, if learning to write involves learning structure, then it is our prime responsibility as teachers to teach structure.

Some Answers to Objections

Some people object to a deliberate and conscientious use of structure in the classroom. So let me digress a moment and answer some of those objections.

First, there is the crowd that says, "Form will paralyze the students." I don't think it does. Study of the balanced sentence does not make it impossible for students to write one, but rather allows them to. The notion or pattern of the balanced sentence must be acquired in order to be fulfilled. Knowledge of structure does not paralyze, but fires up students. It liberates the inarticulate and whets the articulate to new achievements.

A second crowd says, "You can't write if you have nothing to say." But almost no one has nothing to say. We are all given our fair share of perception and the ability to conceive at birth. Notions of form are a kind of "open sesame" for that hidden box of things we all have to say. As I have already suggested, form whets the analytic and synthetic, the critical and creative, faculties of the mind. This stimulates writing, not paralyzes it. It activates the things to say that every person has and gives him a procedure for offering his ideas.

Another group of objectors say, "Teach rhetoric and you'll get mechanically filled formulas." Roger Sale, in his book On Writing, justly objects to such vacuous awkwardness, and I admit that it appears in the early stages of teaching structure. But, from the wide perspective, it lasts only briefly, and anyway awkward formulas are far better than total ineptitude. At least there is some achievement in communication. We all toddle before we walk,

walk before we run, run before we skate with skill and grace. The same is true of writing. We cannot expect beginners to skate. But if we begin with first stages and pursue the procedure patiently, we can eventually teach the patterns by which skill and grace are recognized.

A fourth major objection comes from the "write it like you say it" crowd. This group thinks that good writing is just good talking with the grammar polished. But it isn't. Writing and speaking are different languages, or at least different dialects. Martin Joos has written on a good many of the differences in The Five Clocks. He points out, you will remember, that feedback of some sort every six seconds or so is characteristic of conversation. The nods, grunts, and other responses of a listener are the means the speaker uses to verify that he has communicated clearly and precisely. He verifies each six-second segment before going on to the next. This forces him into a grammar and rhetoric of the run-on and limits his thinking ahead to the segment he is in the midst of. This kind of feedback is missing in writing;

so the writer must achieve clarity and precision in some other way. He does this by a precise grammar, by use of alternating generalization and detail, by manipulation of his phrases and sentences to achieve unity, coherence, and emphasis. In a word, the writer organizes to secure clarity and precision. Such organizational patterns as the paragraph appear in writing, but not in conversation. To encourage the rhetoric of conversation is a misleading disservice to those expected to learn the rhetoric of writing.

Another objection comes from the "self-expression" crowd: "We don't care how they say it, or what they say, just so they get it out. Their souls need to get it out." Yes, therapy exists, and every teacher at one time or another has to encourage therapeutic writing. But it is not what we are charged with teaching. It is a first awkward step, at best, toward rational communication. Therapeutic writing sometimes achieves rational status, but the percentages are slim that random accident as a method will produce coherent

meaning. And, even if self-expression is the end, self-criticism is the ultimate test of success. How do we know when we have expressed ourselves? We walk around to the other side of the paper and read it back to ourselves as a stranger, seeing if it communicates. The only means we have of judging communication is by measuring what is expressed with the mind's capacity to understand. Though self-expression is private, it cannot satisfy even the self until it is minted in the coin of the realm.

In spite of all objections, we cripple our students if we do not equip them with a sense of structure.

Why is Structure Necessary?

Structure is necessary and inevitable because we cannot think or perceive, much less write, without pattern. A defective grammar may hamper, but it will not incapacitate us. A defective vocabulary may limit, but it does not destroy us, as regional and ghetto dialect rhetoric should indicate. But no meaning exists without structure. All successful

writing has structure, whether the writer was conscious of it or not. Structure is basic to both conception and perception.

Indeed, perhaps I do not stretch the matter too much to say that these concepts I am talking about approach a Natural Law of perception as far as writing is concerned. Archetypal norms are the very currency of understanding. If understanding cannot exist without them, neither can communication.

I am sometimes asked, in a quizzical voice, "But, do writers write like that? Should the writer be conscious of structure?" There is good reason to believe that structure functions best when the writer is unaware of it. Indeed, there is reason to believe that structure produces skill and grace only when the writer is unconscious of it, when it is so much a part of his habits and patterns of thought that it is totally disguised in them. But conscious learning is a route to unconscious learning. Consciously

learned behavior such as all of the acts, choices, and judgments involved in driving a car, can come to function unconsciously. We have good reason to believe that most graceful and skillful writers achieved unconscious polish only after a lot of awkward and conscious beginnings. Consciously learned structures can and do filter down and become habit, and even further down to become the unconscious normative patterns of communication. No other assumption than this would make the teaching of composition possible.

Rhetoric has not been very popular in our century. Around 1910, a decline began in the teaching of rhetoric and it virtually disappeared from our colleges by about 1930. We therefore have a teacher corps that is largely uninformed about the structure of the mind, how it perceives and conceives, how it manipulates meanings, how it transmits those meanings to others.

But rhetoric, the archetypal norms of rhetoric, describe

the conditions under which the mind thinks and therefore describes the conditions under which writing must occur. We fail ourselves, our students, and our culture if we fail to teach structure when teaching writing.